LUDWIG VAN BEETHOVEN
Born in Bonn, Germany, December 16, 1770
Died in Vienna, Austria, March 26, 1827

The Five Beethoven Piano Concertos at the Wichita Symphony Orchestra, February 21 and 23, 2020
By Don Reinhold, CEO, Wichita Symphony

The five piano concertos of Ludwig van Beethoven are familiar works to regular concertgoers. Even at a regional orchestra such as Wichita’s, performances of all five as individual works would be typical over a decade. Hearing them in chronological sequence over a single weekend is rare and unusual, but appropriate this year that marks the 250th anniversary of Beethoven’s birth on December 16. While a few other orchestras will accomplish the feat this year with a single soloist or with five different soloists, Wichita is privileged to enjoy performances by Stewart Goodyear, regarded by many as one of today’s leading interpreters in the world of Beethoven’s piano music.

Beethoven’s catalog of works for piano and orchestra is not limited to these five familiar concertos. Also, there is the Triple Concerto, which we heard in Wichita a few seasons ago, and the Choral Fantasy for piano, vocal soloists, and chorus, which we will listen to next December. A Rondo in B-flat Major that was probably the original finale to the Second Concerto appears on recordings and might occur in concert from time to time.

There is a transcription for piano and orchestra of the famous D Major Violin Concerto that Beethoven wrote out on a commission from Muzio Clementi’s London publishing house, but this work is a curiosity done without much commitment from Beethoven. A couple of juvenilia compositions exist mostly in fragments. There are even sketches from around 1816 of a first movement for what would have been the sixth concerto, but Beethoven abandoned this work.

Following in Mozart’s footsteps, Beethoven wrote his concertos as vehicles to display his keyboard virtuosity, which, as we’ll see, was accomplished up until his Fifth Concerto. It was only after “playing them around” a few times for personal benefit that he sent them off to publishers.

Beethoven’s model and point of departure were the piano concertos of Mozart, especially those composed during Mozart’s Viennese years, 1784 - 1791. They reflect the standard concerto form of the day, which started with a fast first movement in sonata-allegro form, followed by a slow movement, and concluding with another fast movement, usually in rondo form. Other nods to conventional form occur in the first movement where sections of the full orchestra, called the tutti or ritornello, alternate with sections dominated by the soloist much in the way concertos were written going back to Johann Sebastian Bach and continued by Mozart and others in the 18th century.
PIANO CONCERTO NO. 4
IN G MAJOR, OP. 58
Last performed by the Wichita Symphony
October 8/9, 2011

During the Advent season of 1808, when theatrical performances were not permitted, Beethoven organized only his third grand “benefit” concert for the public since arriving in Vienna. It had been over five years since the previous one during the Lenten season of 1803 when he premiered the Third Piano Concerto. On December 22, 1808, he organized another. “Benefit” concerts meant that they were the composer’s benefit. Using skills as an entrepreneur, Beethoven would have been responsible for promoting the concert, renting the theater, and hiring and paying the orchestra from proceeds. What was left, he kept for himself.

Like the concert of 1803, the 1808 performance was another marathon. The first half of the concert included (in order), the premiere of the Pastoral Symphony (as it became known), the aria for soprano, Ah! Perfido, a selection from the C Major Mass, and a new Piano Concerto (the Fourth) played by the composer. In the second half of the concert, the audience heard the C Minor Symphony (the Fifth), another movement of the C Major Mass, an improvisatory fantasy performed by Beethoven, and lastly, the work for piano, vocal soloists, and chorus known as the Choral Fantasy. The concert would have run over three hours. If the composer Johann Reichardt, who was present, found it to be “too much of a good thing,” the failure of the heating system at the Theater an der Wien probably had something to do with making matters worse!

The concert was under-rehearsed, and calamity (and even hilarity) occurred. Beethoven had a falling out with the orchestral musicians from the previous month, and they initially refused to rehearse with him in the room. They banned Beethoven to the anteroom, where he probably didn’t hear much on account of his hearing. Beethoven had another spat with his intended soprano for the aria, and she was replaced by the concertmaster’s sister-in-law, who was not up to the task. During the performance of the Choral Fantasy, the orchestra misunderstood a direction from Beethoven regarding a repeat and got off track, requiring Beethoven to stop the performance and correct matters. During his solo performance, Beethoven made a dramatic sideswipe of his arms, smacking one of the choirboys holding candles in the head. The other boy ducked. Laughter ensued angering Beethoven so much that when he re-struck the chord fortissimo, he broke several strings of the piano! As it turned out, this concert would be the last time Beethoven would perform on the piano in public due to his deepening deafness.

The earliest sketches for the Fourth Concerto exist in a book dated 1803 that contained much of the work for the Third Symphony. Beethoven’s concentrated work on the Concerto occurred during 1805 and 1806,
with some sketches shown side-by-side with those for the Fifth Symphony. The Concerto was probably completed in early 1807 and given a run-through in March at the palace of Prince Lobkowitz, one of Beethoven’s benefactors.

The Fourth Concerto is written in the key of G major, a key that Beethoven associated with calm and lightness. Beethoven indicates that the tempo of the first movement will be allegro moderato, fast, but only moderately so. Audiences in Beethoven’s time would expect the concerto to begin with a lengthy orchestral tutti that introduced the main themes of the first movement. We’ve observed this pattern in the first three concertos heard on Friday evening. Here, Beethoven begins with the piano, which enters quietly with a G major chord. It’s a clear break from tradition. Embedded in the opening theme are three eight-note chords repeated as an upbeat, or anacrusis, to the downbeat of the second measure. This familiar “ta-ta-ta-dah” finds its parallel in the opening of the Fifth Symphony, and here, Beethoven is exploring other possibilities tied to that rhythmic motive. As he develops the movement, the motive will be clearly delineated and developed.

The pianist’s five-measure phrase pauses on an incomplete cadence in the dominant of D major, and after a moment of silence, the orchestra enters, not in G major, as would be expected, but in B major, a key quite remote from the home key of G. Furthermore, the orchestra doesn’t just repeat the opening phrase, but extends it with a variation as it makes its way back to G major. The point of this establishes that the piano and orchestra are not entirely on the same page in this piece and will often be working on different tracks. Historians use this work as an example of an early concerto that symbolizes the romantic spirit of the nonconforming individual in society.

The movement emphasizes brilliance in the piano writing that utilizes the full range of an expanded keyboard that takes the piano to a high C not possible in the earlier concertos. Beethoven calls attention to this upper range with greater use of trills than seen previously and foreshadows the thematic element trills would play in his later works. The technical requirements placed upon the pianist are more difficult than experienced in the earlier concertos. There are scales, arpeggios, thirds and even fourths in the right hand, as well as a high degree of chromaticism. The cadenza is lengthy and technically demanding.

As Beethoven developed his concerto style, each of the first movements successively is longer than in the previously composed concerto. The Fourth Concerto’s first movement is about two minutes longer than the Third.

Beethoven’s use of the orchestra changes in the work, too. To achieve a certain calmness, he dispenses with the trumpets and timpani. The winds take on a more independent role than we’ve heard previously, often acting separately from the string choir.
If Beethoven wanted to convey duality in this concerto, the second movement confirms the matter. The shortest of Beethoven’s slow movements for his concertos, it’s also his strangest. Beethoven reduces his orchestra to just strings playing in unison octaves. With a loud dynamic level (forte) and a staccato touch with the bow, the string’s dotted rhythm produces a stern exhortation in the key of E minor. The piano responds from an entirely different world with soft chords marked to be played with the soft pedal down and initially with a harmony of B major. With a hymn-like homophonic texture, the piano answers with songful piety. Towards the end, the piano breaks out with fortissimo trills in the right hand and chromatic gestures in the left hand. The music subsides to a quiet ending in E minor.

The strings initiate the third movement without interruption after the second movement. Soft dynamics, a brisk tempo, and distinctive rhythmic pattern of an eighth note and sixteenth notes suggest that Beethoven intends this to be a humorous romp. To underscore that mood, Beethoven starts in the “wrong” key of C major, the subdominant relationship to G major. The piano enters with its version of the theme. Unable to effectively convey the rapid, repeated notes on Beethoven’s instrument, the piano proposes its embellished version of the theme. After this passage, the entire orchestra re-enters with the main theme, and here Beethoven has prepared another surprise. For the first time in this concerto, the trumpets and timpani wake up from their back-row naps and enter the frolic with a brilliance that the music suppressed up until now.

The piano and orchestra exchange some back and forth passages as if to determine who will gain the upper hand. The piano wins out for the time being and embarks on a new theme of a lyrical nature. The orchestra responds in kind with a contrapuntal passage where they can’t quite seem to agree on the direction to take.

The piano takes over with virtuosity punctuated by orchestral chords until everything seems to lose momentum. With a downward plunge of a scale and a rapid chromatic ascent, the piano leads us back to a return of the opening theme.

The pattern of back and forth tension plays out in good humor throughout the rest of the movement. The pianist has one more florid cadenza to show off. The clarinets and bassoons combine with a lyrical version of the main theme that sounds new. The music reaches a point of suspension that is broken by trills in the piano. Then, the entire orchestra bolts for the finish in presto tempo. The piano enters with final arpeggiated flourishes of G major and D major harmonies that solidly confirm that we’re going to finish the work in the home key of G major after all.

If Beethoven’s first three piano concertos owed a debt to Mozart, this concerto represents Beethoven’s proclamation of individuality and emergence as a prototypical artist of the 19th century.
Imagine that evening in December 1808 when the audience after hearing the new Pastoral Symphony and this concerto on the first half of the concert would return after intermission to listen to the Fifth Symphony for the first time. It was one of those watershed evenings in the history of music where music wasn’t quite the same the day after.

**PIANO CONCERTO NO. 5, IN E-FLAT MAJOR, OP. 73 “EMPEROR”**

*Last performed by the Wichita Symphony April 6/7, 2013*

There is no mistaking the opening of Beethoven’s Emperor Concerto – bold, confident, and brilliant, with an unprecedented display of virtuosic splendor at the outset of a classical period concerto. The three big orchestral chords outline the most basic of all classical music harmonic progressions – tonic, subdominant, dominant – with a final resolution on the tonic E-flat of the main theme. In between each of these chords are written out cadenzas for the piano soloist that embellish the harmony and set forth the germinal motivic ideas that will form the basis of the entire movement.

This is a concerto of heroic proportions, and as a creation of 1809, brings to a culmination Beethoven’s so-called Heroic Period that began in 1802 with work on the Symphony no. 3, known as the *Eroica*. The two works have certain similarities. Both are in the key of E-Flat Major, a key that Beethoven often seemed to associate with heroic qualities.

On the surface, both works appear to spring from feelings about Napoleon Bonaparte. The *Eroica* was initially dedicated to Napoleon until he crowned himself Emperor in 1804, causing Beethoven to remove the dedication in a fit of anger. Five years later, Napoleon would be back in Beethoven’s life. A fourteen-year series of wars between Austria and France brought Napoleon to Vienna’s doorsteps. A 24-hour long bombardment hammered Vienna into submission. Beethoven cowered in the basement of his brother’s home, covering his head with pillows to protect his fragile ears. Between May 13 and November 20, 1809, French troops occupied Vienna. The summer of 1809 was not a pleasant time. Beethoven writes, “We have been suffering misery in a most concentrated form…since May 4, I have produced very little coherent work…What a destructive, disorderly life I see and hear around me: nothing but drums, cannons, and human misery in every form.”

Despite life-long conflicting opinions about Napoleon, the attachment of the nickname “Emperor” to his Fifth Concerto was not Beethoven’s idea. Origins of the nickname are not entirely sure. One story reportedly relates how a French officer at the premiere exclaimed, “It is the Emperor!” Whatever the derivation, it is appropriate. Perhaps it reflects Beethoven’s confidence and self-esteem in his work as an artist.

Towards the end of 1808, Beethoven flirted with an offer from Napoleon’s brother, Jerome, King of Westphalia, to take up
residence as Kapellmeister. Threatened by the possibility of losing one of Vienna’s most esteemed musicians, three of Beethoven’s principal supporters, the Princes Kinsky and Lobkowitz, and Archduke Rudolf convinced Beethoven to stay with the lifelong grant of an annuity guaranteeing economic security. They signed the agreement on March 9, 1809. This generous offer speaks for the vision of the three young noblemen, Rudolf, for one, being only 21 years old. It was to Rudolf that Beethoven dedicated his Fifth Piano Concerto.

If Beethoven didn’t admit it, he surely must have felt like the Emperor of the musical world, for his art had reached a pinnacle that set him apart from all of his contemporaries. The turbulence that had marked works like the Fifth Symphony or the Appassionato Piano Sonata composed a few years earlier now seemed to be replaced by a more confident, inner calm. As Maynard Solomon points out, the music became imbued with “a new lyrical strain” marked by “pre-Romantic freedom of harmonic motion and structural design.”

The first movement of the concerto represents new dimensions for Beethoven. Longer than any of the movements in his symphonies up to that time, it stretches the limits of the sonata form while confounding our expectations. While Beethoven had begun his Fourth Concerto with the piano’s quiet statement of the principal theme, the Fifth’s beginning with a cadenza was innovative. The structural landmarks of the first and second themes, as well as the transition into the development, are blurred by the multiple ideas and constant development of the motives that look forward more to Brahms’s “developing variation” concept than a retrospective to Beethoven’s earlier works.

There is a “military” feel to the music, particularly in the march-like second theme. The music historian Alfred Einstein calls this concerto the apotheosis of the military concept that was part of the Austrian and French musical traditions. According to Einstein, the Viennese of the day “expected the first movement in four-four time of a ‘military’ character; and they reacted with unmixed pleasure when Beethoven not only fulfilled but surpassed their expectations.” This military quality, according to Maynard Solomon, may have embodied Beethoven’s “response to the tide of Napoleonic conquest.”

But what’s particularly striking about this little march idea that seems to come at us initially from a distance is the harmonic relationship to the main theme in E-flat major. During the orchestral exposition, it doesn’t modulate to the dominant key of B-flat as we might expect. Instead, it remains solidly on the E-flat tonic, but in the minor mode. When it reappears in the exposition of the piano’s solo, it appears as a variation in the key of B minor, a key very remote from E-flat. However, almost as if to make amends for wandering astray, Beethoven immediately repeats the theme in the orchestral tutti in the key of B-flat major, not through some harmonic transition, but with an abrupt half-step downward shift to B-flat,
which we’ve heard him do several times before in his piano concertos.

This structural half-step relationship becomes the principal tension point in the piece. We hear it again in the transition from the second movement to the third, when the tonic key of the second movement (B) steps down to B-flat, which becomes the dominant in the key of E-flat major. These details may sound very technical, but they are quite easy to hear. Similar relationships between keys also appear in the third movement.

Whereas the progression from the exposition to the development of the first movement may seem blurred to some listeners, the return to the recapitulation and E-flat major will be obvious. Once again, the orchestra plays the opening three orchestral chords, each followed by a piano cadenza even more ennobled by the addition of octave passages in the piano.

The second movement is a tranquil hymn that is proportionally much shorter than the opening movement. It serves as an interlude of grace and repose between the imposing outer movements. The tempo is marked adagio (slow) un poco mosso (with a little movement). In other words, as Beethoven’s student Carl Czerny taught, “it must not drag.”

The movement emphasizes the sounds of the solo piano, winds, and strings. Timpani and trumpets are absent. The form is a kind of simple variation with three main statements of the hymn, each one different.

The final statement is a beautiful moment of introspective orchestration. We hear the unadorned hymn theme in the winds, while the piano accompanies as a murmuring embellishment of the tune. Meanwhile, the strings play the melody with detached bow strokes on the second half of each beat.

As the music quietly dies away, the music comes to rest hovering on a B, which in turn slips downward to the B-flat. The piano, in a hesitating manner, hints in anticipation of the theme to follow before launching into the full-fledged rendition of the rondo theme that marks the beginning of the third movement.

The theme is rollicking, victorious, and joyful with a rough-hewn dance quality to it. The form is a sonata-rondo, with the rondo part delineated by each return of the dance theme. The meter is in 6/8, which means it has two principal beats to a bar, but against this pattern, Beethoven creates rhythmic tension throughout the movement by setting three beats and four beats against the two-beat pulse.

The coda is another creative stroke of orchestration. To the accompaniment of timpani reiterating a dotted rhythmic pattern reminiscent of the military parades around Vienna, Beethoven harmonizes a descending scale that arrives on the tonic of E-flat. With a final burst of energy, the piano dashes off a final flourish of scales, which the orchestra finishes with a cadential treatment of the rondo’s dance theme.
The concerto was not premiered immediately upon completion. It’s first known performance took place in Leipzig with the Gewandhaus Orchestra on November 11, 1811. With increasing deafness, Beethoven could no longer risk public performance. The soloist’s honors fell to Friedrich Schneider. The first Viennese performance took place three months later with Carl Czerny as the soloist. The orchestration consists of woodwinds in pairs, two horns, two trumpets, timpani and strings, in addition to the piano soloist.

The Leipzig press recognized the significance of the new concerto. The review appearing in January 1812 said, “it is, without doubt, one of the most original, imaginative, most effective, but also one of the most difficult of all existing concertos.” Beethoven pushes the limits of both the instrument and technical abilities as they were known at the time. He uses the entire range of the piano, and there are several striking moments in the upper treble of the instrument.

For anyone today who might question the relevance of classical music, one need only consider this concerto. The contemporary pianist Alfred Brendel states that the Emperor is “a grand and radiant vision, a noble vision of freedom.” Similarly, biographer Lewis Lockwood believes that present-day listeners do not hear pieces like the Emperor or Eroica “as antiquated expressions of a political idealism…but as evocations of the human possibilities that might be realized in a better world.”

Thus, as we celebrate the 250th anniversary of Beethoven’s birth in 2020 and reflect upon the magnificent weekend of hearing these five concertos, we should hope that their message and relevancy will continue to be meaningful for another 250 years.

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